

Where do Japan-Russia territorial negotiations stand now?

A View from Japan

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日口領土交渉の現状：日本の一見解

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Introduction

In contemplating present-day Japan-Russia relations, one is bound to wonder why relations are so much complicated that even after 70 years from the end of WWII, there is still a generally shared impression that there is no stable ground for the two countries to conducting “normal” relations? To understand this complexity, it is necessary to analyze first how this difficulty emerged and took the shape as it exists now. This is the period basically after the end of WWII, particularly covering the war-end-year of 1945, San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, Joint Declaration of 1956 and probably extending to the whole Cold War period until the emergence of Gorbachev in 1985. Second, we need to see the process of negotiations under Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin when Russia went through turbulent changes. Third, we will analyze the contemporary period which may arguably be defined as Abe-Putin period starting from 2012. We need to see why and how so many windows of opportunity are missed. Last but not least, I would like to examine the possibility of a breakthrough in the contemporary period. The impact of rise of China in the region shall be analyzed in that context.

Section One: Cold War period, rise and structuralizing of territorial problem

From Japan’s point of view, the origin of territorial claims fundamentally dates back to several blows which it suffered from the Soviet Union at the closing period of WWII. First it was its betrayal. The Soviet

1) 本論考は、2016年6月に同志社大学で開催された Associations for Asian Studies (AAS)- in-Asia 会議のパネル “Russia’s Engagement in Asia: The Russian Far East and Beyond” (6月25日開催) に提出されたものに会議後若干の修正を加えたものである。

Union attacked Japan on August 8, while the Neutrality Pact was still in force. That feeling of betrayal was augmented because the Japanese government had sent a message conveying to Stalin the will of the Emperor to end the war and had asked him to transmit this message to Truman. Stalin conveyed that message to Truman, but nonetheless attacked Japan. Second it was combined with fear by the atrocities committed by the Soviet Union. Around 600,000 soldiers who were supposed to return home in accordance with the Potsdam Declaration clause 9 were interned and around 60,000 of them died in Soviet's camp. Civilians, men and women, who were located in the area occupied by Soviet troops in Manchuria, North Korea and Kuriles vanished possibly in the order of 100,000 to 200,000. Lastly contradicting the Atlantic Charter and Cairo Declaration where "territorial aggrandizement" or "territorial expansion" are forsaken, the Soviet Union not only occupied the whole chain of the Kurile islands which Japan gained in exchange of Sakhalin in 1875, but also the four islands in its South, which was peacefully demarcated to Japan by the 1855 Treaty of Amity and Friendship.

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But whatever the pains it incurred in 1945, Japan had to adapt to post-war reality. San Francisco Peace Treaty, signed on September 8 1951 became the first major step, and it was actually this Treaty which established first the reality of post-war territorial settlement. In accordance with Article 2(c), "Japan renounced all right, title, and claim to the Kurile Islands." Since the Soviet Union which participated in this conference did not sign this treaty, that clause has not produced any legal or actual effect for the settlement. But circumstantial evidence remains that the Japanese delegation which joined the conference considered Habomai and Shikotan as part of Hokkaido, therefore not belonging to the Kuriles which it relinquished. But on Kunashiri and Etorofu, Prime Minister Yoshida limited himself by just stating that "the (Japanese) delegation cannot accept the Soviet Union's position that Japan gained Kuriles as the result of its aggression." Kunashiri and Etorofu constituted a part of the Kuriles that Japan renounced as Director General of Treaties Bureau Kumao Nishimura stated in the parliamentary debate on October 19, 1951.

One may therefore reasonably argue that had the Soviet Union signed that treaty, all territorial issues between Japan and the Soviet Union would have been resolved in favor of Soviet's interpretation, and there were not only Kunashiri and Etorofu issue but also no Habomai and Shikotan issue left for future resolution. Stalin's decision of not signing the treaty in 1951 in his protest against China's absence at the conference was probably one of the greatest failures of Soviet post-war diplomacy.

Be it as it may because Japan and the Soviet Union did not make any agreement in 1951, the two countries decided to settle all war related issues and had intense negotiations from 1955 till 1956. On August 9 1955 Soviet representative Ambassador Malik proposed the Japanese representative Ambassador Shunichi Matsumoto that "if all other issues are successfully resolved the Soviet Union is prepared to resolve the issue of Habomai and Shikotan." The Japanese government, however, upon reflection did not accept this proposal as the basis of agreement and requested the reversion of Kunashiri and Etorofu in addition. Russian side refused this counter-proposal, negotiations went into stalemate, and through the negotiations taken place in Moscow in 1956 finally the two sides agreed to the Joint Declaration signed on October 19, 1956. The two parties agreed in Article 9 "to

continue the peace treaty negotiations after the resumption of diplomatic relations” and that “the Soviet Union, in responding Japan’s request and taking into account Japan’s interest, agreed to transfer Habomai and Shikotan to Japan,” but “the actual transfer of these islands shall be made after the conclusion of the peace treaty.” Throughout the negotiations Russian side made it clear that Kunashiri and Etorofu was a non-existent issue, and the only reason why peace treaty could not be concluded was due to the inability of both sides to agree on these two islands.

This is how the fundamental framework for negotiations was established. In simple terms, the Soviet Union agreed to have Habomai and Shikotan transferred to Japan, Japan asserted that it requested Kunashiri and Etorofu in addition, the Soviet Union refused and the two sides made compromise in agreeing the wording of Clause 9 of the Joint Declaration. There is no ambiguity that thence onward Habomai-Shikotan and Kunashiri-Etorofu gained different levels of negotiations. That structural difference will constitute the fundamentals of “four islands” negotiations.

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There remain only two issues of importance that happened in the whole process of negotiations since then during the Cold War. First in responding to the conclusion of new security treaty with the United States in 1960, the Soviet Union sent on January 27, 1960 a note-verbal to Japan, indicating that the new treaty “creates a new situation which makes Soviet commitment to transfer Habomai and Shikotan impossible” and that “that transfer can only be made after all foreign troops’ withdrawal from Japan is made.”

Second, in the general political climate under Détente, Kakuei Tanaka visited Moscow on October 7-10 1973 and had talks with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. In the last meeting with Tanaka, Brezhnev agreed orally that “Unresolved issues from the time of WWII” prescribed in the communique include “four islands” issue.

Section Two: End of the Cold War and negotiations in the 1990’s and 2000’s under Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin

When Gorbachev assumed the post of General Secretary of the CPSU in 1985 there emerged an expectation in Japan that a breakthrough of the relationship may be achieved to resolve the territorial issues between the two countries, overcome the psychological rupture between the two countries, and improve substantially their relationship.

But notwithstanding the importance of the other country both for the Soviet Union and Japan, Gorbachev’s visit to Japan was retarded. Shevardnadze visited Japan in January 1986, immediately after he became foreign minister and expectation was rising high that Gorbachev’s visit takes place in early 1987. That expectation was dashed by sudden deterioration of the relationship resulting from Japan’s joining SDI research scheme organized by President Reagan, an allegation that Toshiba affiliated company leaked sensitive submarine engine technology to the Soviet Union, and some harassment to Japanese diplomats in Moscow. When these cooling

down ended and the relations began to warm up in 1988 by former Prime Minister Nakasone's visit to Moscow in May and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's visit to Tokyo in December, another delay occurred in the first half of the 1989. At the bilateral talks at the auspices of Chemical Weapons' Convention conference in January 1989 in Paris, the two sides plunged into serious debate as to which should be realized first, resolution of territorial problem or development of overall relations. This "theological debate" was overcome in May when the Japanese side proposed a new concept of "expanded equilibrium" and proposed to develop all aspects of the relationship.

As the result of these two delays, however, when Gorbachev finally visited Japan on April 16-19 1991, his political power had already been considerably weakened by attacks both from the conservatives who insisted on the preservation of the Union of Soviet Republics and from the reformist forces strongly critical against Communist Party's dictatorship. But notwithstanding this political weakness, Gorbachev established an important framework of negotiations for future bilateral relationship well reflecting the fundamentals of four islands issue. In the communique adopted at his visit, he acknowledged in writing for the first time in history that Kunashiri and Etorofu are object of negotiations and that it was necessary to resolve the question of these islands to conclude a peace treaty. He did not acknowledge however the validity of the 1956 Joint Declaration which determined that Habomai and Shikotan shall be transferred to Japan after the conclusion of the peace treaty.

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Four months after his visit to Japan, conservatives' coup d'état took place on August 19. The coup collapsed in three days' time, then at the end of the year 1991 the Soviet Union fell and the Russian Federation was established under President Yeltsin, and through 1992, there opened probably the widest window of opportunity to settle the territorial problem between the two countries.

In the fall of 1991, responding to earnest plea by newly emerging Russian Federation to improve the relationship substantially, the Japanese government took rapidly three policy initiatives: At the end of September, Foreign Minister Taro Nakayama declared at the United Nations General Assembly new Five Principles to govern Japan-Soviet/Russia relations. Then at the beginning of October, the Japanese government established a new policy of reform assistance of 2.5 billion dollars consisting of Ex.Im. Bank loan and Government guaranteed export insurance. At his October visit to Moscow, Foreign Minister Taro Nakayama made the first concessionary proposal ever on the Northern Territories that "If the sovereignty of four islands to Japan is confirmed the timing, modality and condition of the transfer can be dealt with flexibly." Then on December 25 1991 Gorbachev resigned from the Presidency and the Russian Federation succeeded the Soviet Union. Yeltsin assumed the post of its President.

At the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin's administration was fully engaged in strengthening its relations with Western countries including Japan. Foreign Minister Kozyrev visited Tokyo in March 1992 and made so called "non-existing confidential proposal". The content was kept totally confidential for a long time, but from the time Russian side began to disclose it in 2012, both sides began to reveal their content. The memory of the Japanese side goes as follows: "to start negotiating the issue of transferring Habomai

and Shikotan; once an agreement is reached, to negotiate the issue of Kunashiri and Etorofu in line with that agreement; and once an agreement is reached, to conclude a peace treaty to resolve four islands issue.” Given the fact that this was the period when Russia was creating a new country based on democracy and market economy, that Japan’s economic might was at its highest whereas Russia suffered most the impact of the fall of the Soviet Union, one might analyze that it was the closest point for breakthrough from Japan’s perspective. But then Japan’s leadership considered that Russian proposal was insufficient because the “shadow of Kunashiri and Etorofu” was too weak. Russian disappointment resulted in President Yeltsin’s sudden cancelation of his visit to Japan in September 1992.

The two administrations did their best to remedy the situation. In G7 foreign and finance ministers meeting in April 1993 Japan declared another assistance package of 1.82 billion dollars. Yeltsin was invited to the Tokyo Summit in July and after the riot at the Russian Parliament in late September-early October, Yeltsin’s visit to Tokyo took place as scheduled from October 11 till 13 1993. Fundamentally the issues discussed then were the same as those discussed at Gorbachev’s visit in 1991. On Kunashiri and Etorofu the two sides agreed in the Tokyo Declaration that they were objective of negotiations. The three guiding principles of negotiations: “historical and legal facts, past agreed documents, and the principle of law and justice”, were satisfactory to the Japanese side, but none of the three principles had compelling power to go beyond recognition of the existence of the territorial problem. On Habomai and Shikotan, nothing was explicitly written in the Tokyo Declaration on the 1956 Joint Declaration. Yeltsin did not confirm it orally in his talks with Prime Minister Hosokawa and only confirmed it at the concluding press conference. So this issue was just resolved through half-way “indirect interpretation”.

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After the Tokyo declaration both Russia and Japan entered into the period of domestic politics. Yeltsin had to win the election of 1996 to stabilize his power. In Japan political reform started early 1993 which ousted the Liberal Democratic Party from power. Japan-Russia relations entered into a relatively stable period when implementations of committed economic assistance became important. Some efforts also started to expand the relationship to military to military cooperation. Relations began to pick up only after Yeltsin’s reelection to the presidency in summer 1996 and his recovery in March 1997 from the heart operation that took place soon after his reelection. It was also the time for Russian leadership to look east after major decisions were taken to expand NATO eastward. In Japan LDP came back to power in 1996 under Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto who saw advantages in strengthening relations with Russia when increasingly rise of China and its rivalry with the United States caused fear in Japan of “abandonment” or “entanglement”.

Hashimoto and Yeltsin met at the Denver Summit in 1997 and agreed to hold “confidence building summit” somewhere in the Far-East until the end-year. In July, Hashimoto made a speech in Tokyo to conduct territorial negotiations based on the principles of “trust, mutual interest and long-term cooperation.” Russian side greatly appreciated this new approach. On November 1 and 2 1997 they met at Krasnoyarsk and agreed to conclude peace treaty by 2000 and Hashimoto proposed “Hashimoto-Yeltsin’s economic cooperation plan”. On April 18

and 19 1998, second “confidence building summit” was held at Kawana and a confidential proposal was made by Hashimoto “to delineate boundaries at the Northern side of the four islands and *toumen* (for some time to come) Japan recognizes Russia’s administrative right.” This was a proposal carrying on the approach taken by Foreign Minister Nakayama in October 1991 that “the timing, modality and condition of the transfer can be dealt with flexibly if the sovereignty of four islands to Japan is confirmed”. One may argue that Hashimoto went to the extreme in Kawana, i.e. while preserving the position of “sovereignty of four islands in a bunch”, de facto abandoning the issue of actual transfer. Judging from all available records, President Yeltsin showed great interest in this proposal. But thence onwards no Russian leaders in any politically or administratively responsible position agreed to this proposal.

Russia soon enters into economic crisis and Yeltsin’s health began deteriorating. Hashimoto left his position because of election failure in July and was replaced by his Foreign Minister Keizo Obuchi. Obuchi made his visit to Moscow on November 12 1998 and had presidential meeting with Yeltsin. Russian counter proposal was made in the form of three-page paper and its essence was to conclude two treaties. The first treaty designated four islands to special economic zone with special legal status. The second treaty delineated the frontier and as such constituted peace treaty. But the Japanese side was not ready to treat this proposal as the basis of future agreement.

Since then the Japanese administration made its best to convince the Russian side that the Kawana proposal was the best to resolve the problem, whereas the Russian side made their best to convince the Japanese side that Moscow three-page proposal was the best to realistically solve the issue. Neither side succeeded in convincing the other. President Yeltsin declared his resignation on December 31 1999, formerly designating Vladimir Putin as acting-president of Russia.

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From the time of Putin’s ascendancy to power for about one year the relationship saw unparalleled activation. On April 4, Muneo Suzuki, an influential LDP member appointed as Special Envoy of Prime Minister Obuchi, met with President-elect Putin. Since Obuchi had brain coma Suzuki spoke on behalf of LDP General-Secretary Yoshiro Mori, who was going to replace Obuchi. Suzuki obtained agreement from Putin to meet Mori at the end of April. From April 29 till 30, Prime Minister Mori visited St. Petersburg and had talks with President Putin, covering all aspects of Japan-Russia relations: the importance of strategic and geo-political relations, possibility of wide range of economic relations, and task of concluding peace treaty. From July 21 till 23 Okinawa Summit was held. As the chair of the meeting, Mori greeted Putin warmly.

From September 3 till 6 2000, president Putin made his official visit to Tokyo. On September 4, President Putin stated in the summit meeting that “the 1956 Joint Statement is valid.” What was negated by Gorbachev to Prime Minister Kaifu, and what was only indirectly recognized by President Yeltsin to Prime Minister Hosokawa was thus fully recognized, though orally by President Putin. On September 5, “Statement on Peace Treaty Negotiations by Japanese Prime Minister and Russian President” was adopted, in which Tokyo Declaration of 1993 was recognized in writing. Since then rhythmical talks at summit level, foreign ministers’

level and at officials' level continued for seven months until Mori-Putin's Irkutsk meeting on March 25th 2001. For the first time in Japan-Russia relations, the 1956 Joint Declaration which agreed on the transfer of Habomai and Shikotan and the Tokyo Declaration which stated the resolution of Kunashiri and Etorofu were written in the same document: "Irkutsk Statement". Furthermore Mori proposed to Putin to hold parallel negotiations on Habomai-Shikotan and Kunashiri-Etorofu and Putin responded: "*Posmotrim* (Let us see)." Putin's response to Mori's parallel negotiations proposal was priceless. It goes without saying that nothing is guaranteed on the outcome of Kunashiri and Etorofu when the negotiations start. Precisely that outcome was expected to emerge as the result of the negotiations which should be conducted without any prior-conditions. The negotiations entered to its crucial stage.

But then, when Mori was replaced by Junichiro Koizumi at the end of April, and Makiko Tanaka was appointed as new foreign minister, confusion occurred on the Russian policy from within the Foreign Ministry. This became immediately intertwined with LDP power struggle on domestic reform. As the result of this confusion, Japanese government lost its power to pursue "parallel negotiations" in a way proposed by Prime Minister Mori at Irkutsk. Negotiations soon lost track.

Since the demise of the negotiations fundamentally few developments were worth recording until the re-activation of the negotiations in 2012. May be three developments are worth noting. First, when Abe assumed the post of prime minister in 2006 relations started to warm up. At the bilateral talks held on the occasion of G8 Summit in Germany in 2007, Abe proposed "Eight Points Initiatives concerning the strengthening of cooperation between Japan and Russia in Eastern Siberia and Far-East". The positive mood as reflected in that Summit was carried through to Toyako Summit in 2008 between Prime Minister Fukuda and newly elected President Medvedev.

Second, another unexpected sign came from Abe's Foreign Minister Taro Aso in his parliamentary debate in December 2006. Just upon publication of a book written by Professor Akihiro Iwashita of Hokkaido University "Neither four, nor zero, nor two" Aso expressed his interests in "unorthodox" approach to resolve the territorial problem through "dividing the space into half". Although such approach was immediately denied by MOFA, no one was reprimanded by expressing that "heresy". When that Aso became prime minister in 2008 and appointed Shotaro Yachi, who worked as Vice Minister for Foreign Minister Aso in 2006, as Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Russian affairs, some expectation rose that a new thinking may be emerging. On February 18 2009 Aso and Medvedev met in Sakhalin and the two sides agreed to pursue "new, creative and unconventional approach".

But all these expectations were again dashed just before an important bilateral meeting was supposed to take place on the occasion of G8 Summit to be held in July in Italy. Aso repeated in a parliamentary debate Japanese government's standing position that "Russian occupation of the four islands is unlawful". President Medvedev took this statement as an open provocation shown when Russia was preparing a serious negotiation. Nothing therefore happened in Italy.

Third, Yukio Hatoyama's appointment from DPJ to the post of prime minister in September 2009 rose for

a short while expectations that warm relations might come back because Hatoyama was grand-son of Ichiro Hatoyama who, as Japan's Prime Minister, established diplomatic relations with Russia by the 1956 Joint Declaration. But that expectation was dashed on November 24, 2009, when Hatoyama Government used the word of "unlawful occupation" in responding to a *Shitsumon Shuisho* (Official questions to the government raised by parliamentarians). Relations turned from bad to worse and on November 1 2010 Medvedev became the first Russian President to visit Kunashiri. Feeling of resentment in Japan was well reflected in Prime Minister Naoto Kan's statement on February 7 2011, the day of "Northern Territories", denouncing Medvedev's visit to Kunashiri as "impermissible outrage". After the tsunami and earthquakes on March 11 2011, slight warm up of the relations occurred by Russian reaction of sympathy to those who suffered heavily in Japan, but the opening of a new window of opportunity had to be waited until 2012 upon the comeback of Putin in Presidency and Abe in Prime Minister-ship.

Section Three: Present window of opportunity, opened since 2012 to this day

The starting point of today's window of opportunity was Prime Minister Putin's press conference on March 1 2012 to the correspondents of G8 countries. Asked about the status of Japan-Russia relations by Hirofumi Wakamiya of Asahi Shimbun, Putin stated that "If I am elected as president, then I would like Japan and Russia to enter into close economic partnership as well as to resolve the territorial problem by achieving 'draw (*hikiwake*, in Judo terminology)'"'. When Wakamiya stated that the Japanese would not be satisfied by "two islands solution" as the basis of *hikiwake*, Putin responded that "you are not a diplomat and I am not a president yet. So when I shall be re-elected as president, let us give instructions to the two foreign ministries to start the negotiations (using another Judo word 'to start (*hajime*)'. Unfortunately the Noda Government of DPJ was not in a position to activate the negotiations because Noda's almost exclusive interests were directed to the consumption tax and social security issues. But when Abe came back as Prime Minister in December 2012 things began to look differently. Like all ambitious prime ministers Abe must have been interested to resolve the two remaining issues from WWII, conclusion of peace treaty with Russia and normalization of relations with North Korea. But in addition, he could be particularly enthusiastic in breaking the ice with Russia because that was what his father, Shintaro Abe, had really wanted in dealing with President Gorbachev, but unable to achieve because of his ailing health.

Based on thorough preparations Abe visited Moscow in April 2013. Around fifty top-class businessmen accompanied Abe to demonstrate Japan's interest in developing economic relations, and Abe proposed to open "Two Plus Two" meeting of Foreign and Defense Ministers, next to the United States and Australia. On the territorial problem the two sides agreed in the communique to "conclude a peace treaty through a solution acceptable to both sides." Negotiations started from then and although it appeared that it was a heavy going process, relations began to warm up, culminating to the opening ceremony of Winter Olympics held at Sochi, held on February 7 2014. Three Foreign dignitaries attended the open-ceremony on that day, Abe, Xi Jinping

and Dutch Prime Minister. Putin received Abe with special attention to host him for lunch on the 8th. Japanese media highlighted their personal relations and claimed that perhaps Putin stands closest among top foreign leaders for Abe.

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This situation saw a complete draw back when serious collision occurred at *Maidan Nezaleiznosch* in Kiev between rivalling pro-Western and pro-Russian factions. This collision resulted in swift annexation of Crimea by Russia, stern criticism against Putin on his Crimean and Ukraine policy by US led G7, de facto expulsion of Russia from G8, and introduction of series of economic sanction on Russia.

It so appeared that the policy adopted by Abe was to achieve two objectives. One was to follow the consensus reached by G7 and join all major policy decisions including introduction of economic sanctions. Another was to minimize the content of its sanction and make it happen as late as possible. That policy took place in relations to Japan's first sanction adopted on March 18, 2014; second sanction on April 29; third sanction on August 5, and the fourth sanction on September 24th. It is not easy to analyze Russian reaction on traceable evidence, but it seems to be fairly clear that sometimes in the autumn of 2014 time has come for them to consider that "enough is enough."

The issue of Crimea and Ukraine has profound implications to Russian history and geopolitics. Kiev is the origin of Russia for all students engaged in the study of Russian history. Crimea with its history dating back to Crimean Cossacks and the battle of Sevastopol at the Crimean War of 1853-56 has an enduring memory of tragic legend of modern warfare and Russian national dignity. More importantly through the whole course of Russian modern to contemporary history, through WWI and WWII in particular, Ukraine proved to occupy such an important geopolitical position as a crucial buffer between Russia and Europe. Russia simply could not afford a Ukraine adversarial to Russia and bent exclusively toward Europe. The economic and political confusion even after 20 years of independence offered an opportunity to reshape the map, particularly after Ukraine political turmoil from November 2013 and after the Maidan explosion of 18-21 February 2014. Regaining Crimea, and ensuring a buffer state in Ukraine, which at least include several eastern provinces became a matter of survival, honor and dignity for Russia.

Japan's participation in four economic sanctions from March to September 2014, even if they were carried out at the very end with minimal content, shows profound lack of understanding about Russian core values, both historical and political. How can Russia resolve a territorial issue in a way for Russia to take a concessionary decision to bring the situation to a "draw"? Thus from the autumn of 2014 there disappeared any perspective to see a peace treaty with a solution of four islands issue based on a "draw" solution. Political tensions began to hit the relationship deeply during the following year, 2015. On September 2 2015, according to Itar-Tass, Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov stated that "we will not negotiate with Japan in any way. South Kurile was transferred to our side as the result of WWII. There is no question that Russian sovereignty and jurisdiction are extended over these islands." He also explained that the responsibility of the rupture of negotiations lies in the Japanese side which joined the economic sanction. Foreign Minister Kishida met with Foreign Minister

Lavrov on September 21 2015 in Moscow, but Lavrov made it clear after the talks that “We have not discussed territorial problem. The issue in agenda was the one of the conclusion of the peace treaty.” This message, which sounds in Japanese ears that Russia accepts only peace treaty without resolving territorial problem, is a position which Japan heard so forcefully from the latter part of the 1970’s under Gromyko until Gorbachev assumed power in 1985.

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To the amazement of many, apparently this was not the end of the history. On the one hand, Putin’s international position may have been somewhat raised. On Ukraine, Russian close attachment to the eastern provinces such as Donetsk and Lugansk was obvious but the Minsk agreement became a generally accepted basis for future settlement including Russia. Supply of energy resources from Russia to Ukraine was not entirely at stalemate. Even more importantly Russian active participation, militarily and diplomatically, in the totally confused situation in Syria where ISIS and President Asad do not back away has produced certain impacts, which other engaging actors could not ignore.

At the same time, Abe’s Russian policy of “chasing two rabbits” which was doomed to fail thus far, might have produced some results. On February 9 2016 Abe and Obama had telephone-talks primarily on the issue of North Korean nuclear weapons. But on February 23, several Japanese media began to report quoting “sources in charge of Japan-US relations” that Obama requested to postpone Abe’s programmed visit to Russia until after the Ise-G7 Summit, but Abe did not agree and stated that “For Japan peace treaty with Russia is also important. We need to continue dialogue with Russia”(Yomiuri Shimibun February 26, 2016). Whatever the political motives and calculation, Putin’s administration began to respond to Abe’s call for dialogue. Lavrov made his trip to Tokyo in April. Before his visit, on April 12, he stated in his press conference that he did not refuse the Irkutsk Statement, its major meaning is to continue talks to resolve all issues, including the question of belongingness of four islands, and that whereas the Irkutsk Statement was just a statement, the only document that was ratified by both sides is the 1956 Joint Declaration. In short this Lavrov’s statement gives an impression that Russia began moving its position back toward Irkutsk in 2001.

As it turned out to be, Abe-Putin’s meeting at Sochi on May 6, prior to the Ise-Shima G7 Summit, brought certain excitement to those who followed Japan-Russia relations. On the economic front following up what has been agreed in his April 2013 visit to Moscow, Abe proposed eight points economic cooperation program, which was apparently well received by Putin. On the territorial problem, Abe appeared in front of the press after his meeting with Putin, and stated in somewhat exalted mood that “I received solid response (by President Putin) to make a breakthrough putting down the stagnation thus far accumulated”, “We (President and I) were in agreement to resolve this issue by two of us”, and that “A new approach which will be freed from past ideas shall be sought (by us) so as to step up the negotiations.”

Section Four: What can the “new approach” be to make a breakthrough?

Obviously, those who follow Japan-Russia relations began to ask since Abe-Putin’s Sochi meeting, what is this “new approach?” Neither Abe, nor Putin, nor anyone who is in a responsible position have not disclosed what this “new approach” is, and none of them should disclose it. One may reasonably assume that it has to be a solution of “draw” where neither side loses. But if so, if anyone should disclose the content of “new approach”, due to the sensitivity of this issue from respective country’s nationalism, that “new approach” would be under fire by political forces which do not want to see any compromise and crushed almost immediately.

But in order to give my own image of this “new approach” I introduce herewith a proposal which I made public in July 2013, just two years ago. I labelled this proposal as “two plus alpha” solution. Why should it be “two plus alpha” solution? Because what Japan is requesting is four islands, and what Russia has agreed to transfer was two islands. Both sides might have reservation to this proposal. The Russian side may well argue that their original position is zero and two was maximum possible concession which they had already made in 1956 and there is not an inch of further concession. But the Japanese side may well argue that based on the principle of territorial non-aggrandizement prescribed in the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Declaration Japan has its full right for the whole Kurile Islands, and four islands solution is already a “draw” solution from where Japan cannot deviate even an inch. But if the two sides continue these original positions, there is practically no hope to find a mutually acceptable “draw” solution. So while acknowledging the difficulty of this issue I based my position that “something” should come out from “Kunashiri and Etorofu” and labelled this “something” as alpha. Or else, I may simply draw on to the format agreed at Irkutsk to conduct parallel negotiations on Kunashiri and Etorofu and Habomai and Shikotan, and assuming that some compromised solution may appear from the Kunashiri and Etorofu channel, I labeled it just “alpha”.

But then what “alpha” can there be? When Abe and Putin seem to have made a genuinely perspective start at Abe’s April 2013 visit to Moscow, Ambassador Panov and I had a lone negotiation through May to July to give an example to this “alpha”. The result of this joint effort was published in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* as of July 19th 2013 and reported back on the same day in *Asahi Shimbun* with the full translated text in Digital Asahi. The gist of this joint proposal was to achieve the transfer of Habomai and Shikotan to Japan as is prescribed in the 1956 Joint Declaration. Since President Putin assumed his post in 2000, it has been well known that he became the first President who officially acknowledged the 1956 Joint Declaration after Gromyko denied its implementation in 1960. As for Kunashiri and Etorofu, we proposed to establish a Special Joint Economic Zone which has a special legal status acceptable to both sides. Ambassador Panov and I did not produce this joint proposal out of the blue. As the last proposal made by the Russian side under President Yeltsin an idea of establishing a joint economic zone where a joint legal structure may be incorporated had already been made in November 1998 in Moscow to Prime Minister Obuchi. Panov-Togo joint proposal was based on these two historical documents which did exist sometimes during the negotiations and just added them up: to apply the 1956 Joint Declaration to Habomai and Shikotan, and then to apply the four-islands special economic zone

proposal to Kunashiri and Etorofu.

It goes without saying that the Panov-Togo joint proposal has left several important issues unresolved. Some obvious issues include, when and with what content would the “peace treaty” as envisaged in the 1956 Joint Declaration be concluded, or where would the border be demarcated in this “breakthrough” agreement. But the article in *Nezavisimaya* just expressed hope that these complex issues can be resolved by the wisdom and hard work of diplomats who are actually in charge of the negotiations

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Without prejudging in anyway, what kind of “new approach” Abe may really introduce, let me examine though very briefly the likelihood of the success of Togo-Panov joint proposal. As said above, it naturally depends much whether an answer which is satisfactory to both sides could be found or not. But suppose that answer could be found, will Abe take it and resolve the issue? Let us examine from the three layers of IR theory as was developed by Kenneth Waltz.

First, let us consider about the individuals, particularly leaders who are in a position to take decisions. As said, Shinzo Abe has several reasons why he wants to take new and bold decision and resolve the long stagnated issue. He is an ambitious prime minister who wants to leave his name in history. His mentor-politician is his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, whose legacy is to have taken leadership in revising the Security Treaty against tide of protest and demonstration, the strongest of all post-war Japanese political movement. Abe’s next mentor-politician, his father Shintaro Abe’s most regretted unfinished agenda was perhaps “normalization of the relationship with Russia” as is eloquently written in his important writing “Toward a New Country”. He has reasons to search a compromise idea, let it realize even if there is strong opposition. In May 2016, Abe’s tenure was expected to end in two years’ time. His press statement to “resolve this issue by two of us” should mean that if he really wanted to do so, he needed to move fast.

Second, about domestic political situation, one may arguably divide Japanese people in three categories. First a large number of people who is not interested in territorial issues or the suffering his or her elderly generation went through seventy years ago. They may follow any decision which Abe may take based on *hikiwake* principle. Second, among those who are genuinely and constantly concerned on the territorial problem with Russia, there are so called nationalists who think and whose voices are vocal in asserting “four islands in a bunch” solution. But third, there are those who are seriously concerned that “four islands in a bunch” solution has not resolved the issue for seventy years and time is against them. In my encountering to Japanese public opinion in my regular lecturing, recognition that “a new approach” is needed to break present-day stalemate is increasing. Abe’s credentials to be the prince of conservative politicians allow him to take bold decisions, because he has reasons to believe that nationalists who usually assert that the only policy which Japan may take “four islands in a bunch” may ultimately follow him even if he takes a different decision.

Third, as for international situation which surrounds him, the situation is very complex. On the one hand, Abe is facing a very serious situation of rise of China. His primary responsibility is to settle relations with China through deterrence and dialogue. But in addition his natural foreign policy objective is to have improved

relations with all major neighboring countries in East Asia, and certainly that includes Russia. Strategic calculus goes toward bold decision. But he has an inherent contradiction that a too bold decision might harm his relationship with the United States, which under Obama administration, was very critical against Putin, denouncing him as a destroyer of “post-Cold War international order”. It may well be that to take a bold decision both on territorial issues and economic cooperation, Abe needs to take a more “autonomous position” vis-à-vis the United States, and that might be an extremely difficult choice. Abe may need to come up with a new position something along the following line: “For Japan the single greatest threat it is facing is China and not Russia. Japan’s primary attention therefore in its foreign-security-defense policy is China and Japan needs to do everything necessary to face China based on its policy of deterrence and dialogue. But from this perspective the wisest policy of G7 is to keep Russia within the friendly circle of G7, and for this the critical policy necessary is to treat Russia with respect as a great power which needs to preserve its dignified position in international arena. For this it is rational and justifiable to recognize historical bondage between Russia and Crimea and the geopolitical necessity to see Ukraine as a buffer state between Russia and Europe. Particularly we need to recognize the critical importance of such eastern provinces as Donetsk and Lugansk for Russia. These should be common goals of G7 for the interests of G7, and Japan is going to take a leadership position toward that direction.”

Conclusion

Would Abe succeed in resolving the territorial problem with Russia? At the point of writing of this paper, it is hard to come up with a convincing conclusion. I do think that there is a definite willingness and readiness to focus on this issue in Abe in person. Abe’s domestic position as the prince of conservative leadership allows him to take a bold decision. So his difficulty does not come from his domestic position. His greatest challenge comes from the international situation, in particular in facing U.S., possibly other G7 countries such as Canada or Great Britain, to stay strictly within the agreed framework of continuing sanctioning Russia. Thus in a way much will depend on the changing structure of power in East Asia. This is an issue which needs careful scrutiny which goes beyond the intended scope of this paper.

END

